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HOW PREPARED ARE SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS FOR BEGINNERS' PRACTICE? REFLECTIONS OF NEWLY QUALIFIED BSW GRADUATES

Mariana de Jager

INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM FORMULATION AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The establishment of social work qualifications in South Africa emerged at a few universities from 1937 onwards (Earle, 2008; Nicholas, Rautenbach & Maistry, 2010; Potgieter, 1998). In accordance with Section 18A (1) of the Social Service Professions Act (No. 110 of 1978), up until 1987 a social worker required a three-year degree, after which a four-year qualification was required. At some institutions the introduction of a fourth year was included in the undergraduate programme, while others added the fourth year as a separate Honours qualification. This system allowed social workers to gain registration through a range of bachelor's qualifications in the arts, social sciences or social work. At the time the need for a standardised qualification for all social workers to meet the requirements of practice settings became a growing concern to all the different stakeholders.

In line with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) legislation (2003), the Standards Generating Body (SGB) for social work was established in 2001. The professional degree or the Bachelor in Social Work (BSW) which is also registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), became compulsory from the first level at all institutions in South Africa from 2007. Students at the 17 universities which offered a social work qualification were now required to register directly for a closed four-year professional qualification, namely the BSW. The new curricula had to comply with SAQA's requirements for outcomes-based education, as well as to meet the 27 exit-level outcomes of the BSW as identified by the SGB, as depicted in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
EXIT-LEVEL OUTCOMES (ELOS) OF THE BSW QUALIFICATION

	Exit-Level Outcomes (ELOs)
1.	Develop and maintain professional social work relationships with client systems.
2.	Assess client systems' social functioning.
3.	Plan and implement appropriate social work intervention strategies and techniques at micro, mezzo and macro levels.
4.	Access and utilise resources appropriate to client systems' needs and strengths.
5.	Produce and maintain records of social work interventions, processes and outcomes.
6.	Evaluate the outcomes of social work intervention strategies, techniques and processes.
7.	Terminate social work intervention.
8.	Negotiate and utilise contracts during social work intervention.
9.	Demonstrate social work values while interacting with human diversity.
10.	Appraise and implement the ethical principles and values of social work.
11.	Use, plan and execute social work research.
12.	Work effectively with social workers and members of inter-sectoral and multi- and/or inter-disciplinary teams in social service delivery.

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Exit-Level Outcomes (ELOs)	
13.	Identify, select and implement various techniques, methods and means of raising awareness, developing critical consciousness about the structural forces of oppression, exclusion and disempowerment, and use such awareness to engage people as change agents.
14.	Analyse human behaviour with regard to the intersections of race, class, culture, ethnicity, gender, differential abilities and sexual orientation.
15.	Critically appraise social welfare and social work from a global, regional (African) and national perspective.
16.	Critically appraise the current status and position of the social work profession within the South African welfare context.
17.	Apply and uphold the basic values and principles enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the S.A. Constitution in relation to social work service delivery.
18.	Elucidate national, provincial and local governance structures, and the general laws and charters governing social welfare policy and social work services in South Africa.
19.	Demonstrate understanding of how social policies and legislation on social issues impact on these issues and how to use legislation ethically and accountably in order to protect and improve the quality of life of client systems from a social work perspective.
20.	Demonstrate understanding of how social welfare policy and legislation are developed and influenced.
21.	Demonstrate understanding of the roles, functions, knowledge and skills for effective social work supervision and consultation.
22.	Demonstrate understanding of roles, functions, principles and characteristics of management and administration within social service delivery.
23.	Formulate a business plan for the funding of social services.
24.	Identify the influence of the relationship between socio-political and economic factors on social services.
25.	Demonstrate understanding of the roles and functions of the social worker within relevant statutory frameworks.
26.	Identify how social security is used optimally for the benefit of client systems.
27.	Identify the purpose, functions and principles of social work within the social development paradigm.

Each module in the curriculum has specified learning outcomes against which students are assessed at the end of each academic year. By the time they qualify, they should be able to indicate that they meet all the exit-level outcomes (indicated above) and associated criteria. Universities had to make sure that the new curriculum would address not only the theoretical and practical knowledge requirements of general social work practice in South Africa, but also all eight of SAQA's critical cross-field (generic) outcomes (Bozalek, 2009; Earle, 2008). Subsequently the first BSW graduates qualified from 2010 at the respective universities and entered practice.

At the same time some of the training institutions offering social work training reported a decrease in the number of learners applying to study social work (Draft Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social Workers, 2006:9). Coupled with this, more challenges arose for the respective stakeholders: noticeable discrepancies in the number of learners who entered universities to study social work and those who completed their studies and entered the field; slow throughput rates; the high dropout number amongst students; the capping of numbers at some universities (Draft Recruitment and Retention Strategy for

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Social Workers, 2006:27); and a low subsidy by the Department of Higher Education (Draft Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social Workers, 2006:27; Earle, 2008).

Apart from standardising the curriculum for the training of social workers at the respective training institutions, South Africa's welfare sector experienced its own challenges. South African social workers were leaving the profession at an alarming rate, either to pursue a career overseas, or become occupationally employed in a career path other than social work (Adlem, 2008; Draft Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social Workers, 2006; Engelbrecht, 2006:131; Naidoo & Kasiram, 2006). Social workers also reported negative working conditions, such as burnout (Malan & Rothman, 2002:1), concerns about safety and security, poor working conditions, poor salaries and staff shortages, as well as a high staff turnover, high caseloads and a lack of resources (Alpaslan & Schenck, 2012; Malan & Rothman, 2002; Naidoo & Kasiram, 2003; Schenck, 2004). As a result, the Draft Scarce Skills Policy Framework (2003) identified social work as a scarce skill and the Retention Strategy for Social Work (2006) was drafted in order to retain the existing social workers and recruit more of these professionals. In spite of the recruitment and retention strategy, the serious mismatch continues between the overwhelming demands for social services and the number of social workers to deliver on these demands.

The total number of social workers registered by the SA Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) during March 2012 was 16 740 (Moloi, 2012). Of these social workers, 6 655 (40%) were employed by the government and 2 634 (16%) by non-profit organisations (NPOs). This boils down to the fact that only 9 000 social workers are servicing the current population of 50 million people in South Africa across all sectors (Statistics SA, 2011). This leaves 7 451 (45%) registered social workers who are either employed in the private sector or are not practising social work.

To make matters even worse, the South African population is faced with various social problems, such as violence, abuse, substance abuse, HIV and AIDS, poverty, food insecurity and unemployment, affecting vulnerable groups such as women, children, elderly people, the disabled and youths, who all require social work intervention.

A total of 330 000 children and 5 million adults in South Africa are currently infected with HIV (Laing in *The Telegraph* of 21 May 2012). There are an estimated 7.3 million orphans in South Africa, while 150 000 youngsters are believed to be living in child-headed households (UNICEF, 2010). In addition, 50 000 children are victims of crime every year, while the South Africa Social Security Agency indicates that 500 000 children are in formal, court-ordered foster care. Although the unemployment rate declined from 25.2% in 2011 to 24.9% in 2012, 11.9 million children are still living in poverty (Nkosi, 2011).

It is against this background that BSW graduates started their careers as beginner social workers. In an attempt to investigate how their undergraduate training prepared them for beginners' practice, a qualitative study was undertaken.

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RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was followed in this study because in essence qualitative research is an approach that allows a researcher to investigate people's experiences in detail. It allows for identifying issues from the participants' perspectives, in terms of how they understand their experiences, and the meanings and interpretations they give to them (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011:8-9). Qualitative studies attempt to get a so-called "insider's view" of a phenomenon, with a focus on describing rather than explaining or making predictions (Babbie & Mouton, 2007:53). This approach allows a researcher to study selected issues in depth (Durrheim, 2006:47). It is also an approach that permits a researcher to make an interpretation of observations which cannot be separated from the researcher's own background, history, context and prior understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2007:39).

An explorative, descriptive and contextual research design was employed for this study. Explorative research aims to generate new information and make a preliminary investigation into a relatively unknown phenomenon (Mouton, 2001:103). Descriptive studies, on the other hand, aim to make accurate descriptions of phenomena (Durrheim, 2006:44). A contextual research design was employed in order to describe and illuminate the *subject context* for the purpose of providing a backdrop to the study and lay a foundation for verifying the research findings. Subject context relates to aspects of the research topic in terms of demographic patterns, the social, economic, political and context, and historical issues (Hennink *et al*., 2011:268). This research design was employed to explore and describe from the perspective of the newly qualified BSW graduates (by way of their reflections) how their undergraduate social work studies prepared them for beginners' practice.

A "population" refers to a group about whom a researcher wants to draw conclusions (Babbie & Mouton, 2007:100). Durrheim and Painter (2006:133) note that a population comprises a large group from which a sample is taken. The population of this study consisted of all the BSW graduates who were practising as social workers in the welfare sector of the Cape Peninsula.

Purposive sampling was adopted, as information-rich cases were sought according to preselected criteria relevant to the particular research question (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest & Namey, 2005:5) and included in the sample that could shed light on the phenomenon being studied. Beginner social workers who had qualified with a BSW and were working in the government sector or at NGOs in the Cape Peninsula, and were willing to take part in the study, were purposefully selected. In order to obtain participants for the individual in-depth interviews, the researcher approached welfare organisations where fourth-year student social workers were placed for their practical work, and informed them about the proposed project with a view to seeking their permission to conduct the research project with them. When permission was granted, the directors, programme managers and supervisors concerned were requested to inform

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fieldworkers[1] about possible individuals who met the aforementioned inclusion criteria. Regarding the recruitment of participants for the focus group discussions, the researcher followed the same procedure, except that the invitation was directed to welfare organisations that did not accommodate student social workers for fieldwork placements. The researcher herself conducted two different focus group discussions at a venue at UWC with participants who met the aforementioned criteria.

The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation (Donalek & Soldwish, 2004:356; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002:72). The focus group discussions as well as the in-depth individual interviews were focused and facilitated by open-ended questions contained in interview guides which contained a list of questions used by the interviewer to give direction and aid memory during the interview (Hennink *et al*., 2011:112). Twenty-five participants took part in two focus group discussions (12 and 13 respectively), while 55 participants were individually interviewed until the data became repetitive. Field notes, in the form of observational notes, were taken by the fieldworkers and the researcher to supplement the verbal information from the participants. Observational notes are deemed vital to the accurate description of what has transpired during an interview, and are used to make empirical observations and to table the researcher's interpretations of such comments (Babbie, 2004:304). Once all the interviews were concluded, the researcher transcribed the audiotapes of both the individual interviews and focus group interviews verbatim, so that a word-for-word retelling of the participants' reflections was documented.

The process of data analysis followed the eight steps suggested by Tesch (in Creswell, 2009:186). The researcher read through all the transcripts a number of times to become familiar with the data through immersion. The fieldworkers' notes and those of the researcher as well as their field observations were used to guide the process of coding, as proposed by Babbie (2004:377). Significant themes were highlighted in the data. Corresponding perceptions and themes were arranged together in columns with headings and sub-headings. These were called "themes" and "sub-themes", as this constitutes coding of the data (Creswell, 2007:148). Data were thus put through a process of thematic analysis, as is often done in qualitative studies, according to Creswell (2007:75). From these descriptions the researcher proceeded to formulate combined descriptions representative of the essence of the phenomena, grouped into themes and sub-themes. This representation of data allowed the researcher to initiate discussion and debate regarding the findings, as well as comparing and contrasting these findings with those of other studies and the literature.

Ethical considerations such as no harm being done to participants, confidentiality, informed consent and the participants' right to withdraw at any stage of the process were adhered to. The project was also registered at the Senate Higher Degrees of the University of the Western Cape, and written permission to conduct the study from the various stakeholders was obtained by means of a written request.

[1] The fieldworkers were fourth-level student social workers who were doing the fieldwork in social practical work fieldwork placement.

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The next section of this article will present the biographical particulars of the sample, followed by a discussion of the research findings in a thematic fashion.

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Eighty social workers who qualified with a BSW took part in the study. Their ethnicity and genders are set out in the following table.

TABLE 2
THE ETHNICITY AND GENDER OF SOCIAL WORKERS WHO HAD GRADUATED WITH A BSW

Ethnicity	Male	Female
Black	13	26
Coloured	9	24
White	1	4
Indian	1	2
Total	24	56

Forty-four of the participants had practised from 2-3 years, 27 between one and two years, and nine participants for less than a year, which correlates with the fact that the first BSW graduates started their career as social workers only in 2010. The majority, namely 65 of the 80 participants, worked in the government sector, while 15 worked at an NGO. These findings are in agreement with the fact that high numbers of social work students are currently recipients of scholarships from the Department of Social Development as part of the retention strategy for social workers, and are therefore obliged to work for the Department (Draft Recruitment Retention Strategy, 2006) (Theme 3).

With regard to the age of the participants, it became evident that the newly qualified BSW graduates entered the profession mostly between the ages of 25 and 30, and between 30 and 35 years.

FINDINGS

The themes that were generated from the data are presented below.

Theme 1: Upon reflection, the newly qualified BSW graduates stated that their training did not prepare them adequately for statutory social work.

The participants in this study maintained that the biggest section of their workload was child- and family-centred, and therefore mostly statutory in nature. This statement agreed with the findings of Mohamed (2005), Soji (2005), Earle (2008) and Kleijn (2004), who emphasised that statutory work makes up the biggest part of social workers' already high caseloads. According to the classification of the Integrated Service Delivery Model for the Department of Social Work (2005:19), there are four levels of intervention, namely (i) Prevention, (ii) Early intervention (non-statutory), (iii) Statutory intervention/ residential/ alternative care, and (iv) Reconstruction and aftercare. When

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social workers reach the level of statutory intervention, it means that preventative and any intervention (non-statutory) services have failed. Service delivery thus becomes more labour intensive, time-consuming and costly as it continues to statutory intervention and reconstruction services (Financing Policy, 1999).

The newly qualified BSW graduates emphasised that their knowledge of legislation (and the practicalities on how to implement it in practice) and the Child Care Act (Act No. 38 of 2005) in particular (acquired during their undergraduate training) did not equip them effectively for practice. Their views are expressed in the following storylines:

> *"I think the biggest gap [during training] was Legislation, especially the Children's Act. We were introduced to the Children's Act, but not how to compile the different reports, which forms to use."*
>
> *"We were not taught where and when to use the different Acts."*
>
> *"Legislation. We only touched on the Child Care Act. The others were only mentioned ...what about the Child Justice Bill, the Criminal Procedures Bill, the Act for the Aged, the Prevention of Domestic Violence?"*

The participants recommended that especially their information about the Child Care Act (Act No. 38 of 2005) and the procedure around statutory work should receive more emphasis in theory as well as in practical modules during training, in order to familiarise them with this important and often most stressful part of their workload. The following quotation summarises the recommendations made by the participants in this regard:

> *"The Child Care Act should form part of the curriculum because when we start to work, students come with their psychology and social work text books and you do not apply it on a daily basis. We apply the Child Care Act on a daily basis."*

Participants also indicated that they were not familiarised with the practical details of statutory work procedures, such as:

> *"Like going to court and showing the student what a Form 36 looks like and what is happening when a child is removed."*
>
> *"For instance, they must learn you more about the Child Care Act. Show you how to fill in a Form 4 and the different procedures."*
>
> *"... and the different types of reports like the 16 (2)s regarding foster placements and the 33.3 sections which is now 159s and the 176. Senior social workers become irritated with us if we do not know it."*

The participants also pointed to the fact that as beginner social workers, they are overwhelmed by the statutory social work service process, and in particular the Children's Court. They also stressed that their lack of knowledge and skills in this regard contributed to a lack of confidence, as articulated in the following comments:

> *"We needed orientation or exposure to a Children's Court during our training. One is not able to support your clients if you are overwhelmed yourself."*

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"We need to know certain things about Foster Care…. If one does not have the knowledge or experience, one cannot be confident about what you need to do."

"The Child Care Act requires doing what is in the best interest of the child. What is the best interest of the child?"

The participants pointed out that they were experiencing challenges with regard to preparing court reports and asserting themselves, for instance:

"We struggle to assert ourselves in court."

"We have trouble with language, especially with reports required by the court."

On closer scrutiny of the reflections provided by the newly qualified BSW graduates under Theme 1 above, the researcher concluded the following:

- The newly qualified BSW graduates are ill-informed about the various pieces of legislation or Acts applicable to the various fields of service they encounter in practice;
- They feel particularly inadequate about how to implement the Children's Act (Act No. 38 of 2005) in practice, and how to conduct themselves with confidence in the legal systems in practice.

These conclusions, coupled with the participants' own recommendation that information on the Child Care Act (Act No. 38 of 2005) and the procedure around statutory work should receive more emphasis in theory as well as in practical modules during training in order to familiarise prospective social workers with this important and often most stressful part of their workload, warrant that Exit-level Outcome 25 and its Associated Assessment Criteria (as depicted in Table 3 below) should receive more prominence during undergraduate training (both in theory and practice).

TABLE 3
ELO 25 AND ITS ASSOCIATED ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

25. Demonstrate understanding of the roles and functions of the social worker within relevant statutory frameworks.	25.1 Policies and legislation in respect of areas such as criminal justice, mental health and child and family care are clearly described. 25.2 The roles and functions of the social worker in relation to the different courts and court procedures are clearly described. 25.3 Practice reflects the ability to work in accordance with statutory and legal requirements and to carry out orders of the court.

This recommendation seems to be not far-fetched seeing that various authors have already underscored the fact that statutory work makes up the biggest part of social workers' already high caseloads (Earle, 2008; Kleijn, 2004; Mohamed 2005; Soji, 2005) and the Department of Social Development's own projections that some 16 500 social workers are required to provide the social welfare needs in terms of the Children's Act (Act No. 38 of 2005). This number accounts for 99% of all registered social workers in

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South Africa, who are also required to provide services related to substance abuse, elderly people, people with disabilities, crime prevention and support, HIV/AIDS, and so on (Moloi, 2012). According to the Draft Recruitment and Retention Strategy (2006), the welfare sector will not be able to respond to the obligations of the Child Care Act (Act No. 38 of 2005). This statement emphasises not only the critical need for more social workers in the country, but also the need for proper practice- and reality-based undergraduate statutory social work training, in order to equip newly qualified BSW graduates to render statutory social work services immediately and effectively.

Theme 2: Upon reflection, the newly qualified BSW graduates described challenges regarding the implementation of their knowledge, theory and skills in practice.

The BSW qualification was designed to meet the core purposes of social work which are embedded in the following definition: "The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilizing theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the point where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work" (International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work, 2000).

Newly qualified social workers are therefore required to have at their disposal a particular skill set which is to a large extent underpinned by and associated with theory on intervention on micro, mezzo and macro levels. This in essence relates to the following ELOs as depicted in Table 4 below, related to intervention.

TABLE 4
EXIT-LEVEL OUTCOMES AND ASSOCIATED ASSESSMENT CRITERIA RELATED TO INTERVENTION

Exit-Level Outcomes (ELOs)	Associated Assessment Criteria (AACs)
1. Develop and maintain professional social work relationships with client systems.	1.1 Professional relationships are purposefully founded on knowledge of and insight into the nature of client systems and their dynamics. 1.2 Professional relationships are characterised by the purposeful implementation of social work principles at the individual, family, group, community and organisational level. 1.3 Professional relationships clearly demonstrate an understanding of ethical parameters. 1.4 Enabling environments are created for client systems to develop their full capacity.
2. Assess client systems' social functioning.	2.1 Assessments reflect the ability to undertake a comprehensive analysis of client systems' needs and strengths. 2.2 Analyses of client systems' needs and strengths reflect the application of appropriate theoretical frameworks. 2.3 Assessments demonstrate the use of appropriate social work tools and data. 2.4 Assessments clearly reflect the influence and impact of social circumstances and social systems on client systems'

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Exit-Level Outcomes (ELOs)	Associated Assessment Criteria (AACs)
	functioning. 2.5 Assessments demonstrate a holistic approach to client systems' social functioning. 2.6 Assessments result in, as far as is reasonable and possible, mutually agreed-upon goals. 2.7 Assessment processes and conclusions are recorded clearly, systematically and accurately.
3. Plan and implement appropriate social work intervention strategies and techniques at micro, mezzo and macro levels.	3.1 Intervention plans take into account social systems impacting on client systems' functioning. 3.2 Intervention plans are based on assessment and the appropriate use of strategies and techniques to achieve identified goals. 3.3 Intervention strategies, models and techniques are based on comprehensive assessment of client systems. 3.4 Intervention strategies and techniques are purposefully aimed at the achievement of identified goals. 3.5 Interventions reflect the appropriate application of a range of skills (range of skills includes, for example communication, problem-solving, networking, negotiation, mediation, advocacy and interviewing skills). 3.6 Intervention strategies and techniques are appropriately implemented in accordance with corresponding theoretical assumptions. 3.7 Interventions include the appropriate use of social work tools and data.
4. Access and utilise resources appropriate to client systems' needs and strengths.	4.1 Resources that are identified and utilised are appropriate to client systems' needs, strengths and goals. 4.2 Referrals to appropriate resources are made according to agreed-upon methods of referral. 4.3 Networking with resources and organisations is linked directly to the needs of client systems.
6. Evaluate the outcomes of social work intervention strategies, techniques and processes.	6.1 Evaluations clearly describe the outcomes of the intervention strategies, techniques and processes utilised in relation to the stated goals and client systems' strengths and needs. 6.2 Evaluations are purposefully used as the basis for planning, termination and implementation of ongoing services. 6.3 Evaluations demonstrate a capacity for self-awareness and reflection.
7. Terminate social work intervention	7.1 Wherever feasible, termination of services is mutually agreed to by the relevant parties and occurs in accordance with social work principles. 7.2 Preparation of client systems for termination of services is timeous and realistic. 7.3 Termination is based, as far as is reasonable and possible, on the achievement of goals and the client systems' ability to function independently. 7.4 All administrative aspects of termination are completed in accordance with professional requirements.
8. Negotiate and utilise contracts during social work	8.1 Contracts contain, as far as is reasonable and possible, mutually agreed-upon principles, expectations, goals and procedures.

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Exit-Level Outcomes (ELOs)	Associated Assessment Criteria (AACs)
intervention.	8.2 Contracts are used to guide practice with clients. 8.3 Contracts contain an exposition of possible results/consequences of breaching the mutually agreed-upon principles, expectations, goals and procedures for both the practitioner and the client system.
9. Demonstrate social work values while interacting with human diversity.	9.1 Assessments, intervention plans, strategies, techniques, and outcomes analyses reflect sensitivity for diversity and the ability to work with diverse client systems. 9.2 Practice demonstrates awareness of different viewpoints and values, and the ability to appreciate these in relation to one's own views and values. 9.3 Assessments explicitly include analyses of possible elements of diversity that may impact on the professional relationship. 9.4 Interaction and teamwork within the practice context reflect understanding and acceptance of diversity. 9.5 Referrals are appropriate to and in accordance with the unique needs of client systems.
10. Appraise and implement the ethical principles and values of social work.	10.1 Practice demonstrates awareness of, and ability to implement, social work values and ethical principles. 10.2 The practical implications of ethical principles and values for social work practice are critically appraised. 10.3 The provisions in the Code of Ethics of the South African Council for Social Service Professions are critiqued in relation to its potential limitations and benefits. 10.4 The potential impact of personal life experiences and personal values on social work practice is clearly recognised.
12. Work effectively with social workers and members of inter-sectoral and multi- and/or inter-disciplinary teams in social service delivery.	12.1 Descriptions clearly indicate the purpose and value of the team approach in social work services. 12.2 Descriptions clearly and appropriately distinguish between the individual roles and functions of the social work team members (social worker, student social worker, social auxiliary worker and volunteer) in social service delivery. 12.3 The definitions of "social auxiliary work" and "social work" highlight the differences between the two, and their relationship with each other. 12.4 Social auxiliary work is clearly understood as providing a supportive and complementary service to social work, focusing particularly on prevention, developmental services and social care. 12.5 The critical role played by social auxiliary work within the social welfare context is substantially motivated. 12.6 Practice clearly reflects a critical understanding of the contribution made and valuable role played by volunteers in social service delivery. 12.7 Practice reflects the ability to identify and work with sectors relevant to the identified social problem or issue. 12.8 The roles and functions of team members in a given context, relevant to the learner's field placement, are clearly identified. 12.9 Practice reflects the ethics of teamwork.

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Essentially this means that beginner social workers should be able, through the application of these theories and various skills at their disposal, to assist and empower individuals, families, groups and communities, and enhance their social functioning and problem-solving capacities. Furthermore, beginner social workers need to capacitate their client system to maintain their social functioning, help them accomplish tasks, prevent and alleviate distress, and use resources effectively (Bradley, 2008; Lombard, 2003). Newly qualified social workers may well experience discomfort and stress when the application of these theories becomes difficult or impractical to apply in practice, because during their training they were expected to provide evidence that they met the requirements of these outcome levels (Bradley, 2008).

Global and national standards for social work training demand that institutions for higher learning include a theoretical as well as a practical component in the social work curriculum. The integration of theory and practice should aim purposefully at enhancing students' competency and skills (SAQA, 2003:9). At the same time, the introduction of outcomes-based education (OBE) in South Africa (**Government Gazette** No. 19640, 1998) has confirmed the need for addressing challenges relating to the integration of theory and practice.

The participants who took part in this study reflected on and articulated the challenges experienced in implementing or applying the knowledge, theory and skills obtained during their undergraduate studies in their various practice contexts along the following lines:

> *"We learned the ideal at university but in practice it is not implemented."*
>
> *"When I was studying I thought everything that I learned will be exercised in practice. But when I got into practice I realised that it is a whole different ball game, everything is not according to the book. It made me think of what was the sense of it all."*

The reflections of participants (as encapsulated in the above quotations) are in agreement with the study by Bradley (2008), who indicated that participants viewed their training as offering valuable input, but that it could be improved by being more "reality-based", reflecting the "sharp end" of practice, in order to help them deal with "real pressures" in the field.

Making matters even worse is the fact that newly qualified BSW graduates stated that not even experienced social workers were implementing theory in practice. They indicated that this was not motivating them to do as they had been trained, and that it was not upholding the required standards of the profession. Some participants emphasised the importance of implementing theory in practice, despite the existing challenges such as high caseloads and staff shortages. In addition, they pointed out that while they were taught different theories during their training, they had not mastered them all and found it difficult to apply them in their practice settings. The following comments are provided in support of the previous trains of thought.

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"The University focused on too many theories. They should rather focus on one or two that are applicable in the field."

"Too many different theories – there is no time to think about different theories [in practice settings]; you just need to get the work done."

The participants concluded that their social work training equipped them with a relevant knowledge base, but they often lacked the "how" or the skills to implement theory in practice. For example:

"I will say that our knowledge base is good, but we know nothing about implementation."

The South African *Government Gazette* No. 23406 (2002:23) refers to a learning outcome as a description of what (knowledge, skills and values) learners should show, demonstrate and be able to do at the end of the General Education and Training band. A set of learning outcomes should therefore ensure integration (of theory and skills in practice) and progression in the development of concepts, skills and values in accordance with the assessment standards. This approach to education entails a paradigm shift in that it focuses on "accomplishing results rather than merely providing a service" (Spady, 1994:8). The evidence of achievement of outcomes should be collected by means of a variety of methods of assessment, both in fieldwork and classroom learning throughout the curriculum. Assessment strategies for theory, skills and application in practice should therefore be used throughout the social work training programme and include, amongst other things, written assignments, tests, written and oral examinations, fieldwork reports, collaborative evaluations, observation of fieldwork practice, and a portfolio of evidence (SAQA, 2003:8).

The participants of this study also drew attention, upon reflection, to the following challenges regarding the implementation of the knowledge gained during their training, as well as expressing some disillusionment about the realities of practice. They referred to this along the following lines:

"I think there is a tendency for people to forget theory when they start working. Our high workload makes it even worse, because there is not time to take the long route."

"... for instance, speaking of the interview, you have an introduction phase, planning phase etcetera, all of those, but in reality when the client is in front of you crying or a child tells you that she was sexually abused, you do not get time to engage and explore and to plan your intervention."

"... theory you apply, but what comes out as the end result is not always what the theory says will happen."

In elaborating on the aspect of "high workload" Govender (in the *Sunday Times* of 28 October 2007) states that while their British counterparts carry caseloads of 20-30 cases, social workers in South Africa's have caseloads totalling 600 cases, and in extreme circumstances can be as high as 3 000 cases. In addition, the intensity of social problems

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in the South African context such as crime, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect, HIV/AIDS and poverty-related issues, as well as staff shortages, make things even worse. A lack of supervision by experienced social workers in the workplace, coupled with the aforementioned factors, is a great concern for social workers who qualified with a BSW as a new generation of social workers (Adlem, 2008; Alpaslan & Schenck, 2012).

Apart from being challenged in applying the theories learned during their undergraduate training in practice, the newly qualified BSW graduates indicated that they also struggled to implement all the basic methods of social work in the workplace. For example:

> *"On mezzo level it has been difficult because one can't always work in groups; group work here seems like more of a frustration because there are so many other things that need to be done."*

> *"Even macro programmes. I am running a programme for 200 people, but there is always a crisis."*

The graduates' difficulties (as expressed above) in relation to the implementation of their knowledge, theory and skills in practice, are confirmed in the literature, where reference is made to the fact that there is a growing concern that social work students and beginner social workers are challenged by the integration of theory and practice (Carelse, 2010; Oko, 2008). Nzira and Williams (2009:158-159) emphasise the importance of students being placed at suitable organisations for fieldwork practice, and stress that the organisation's framework for practice must be in line with what is required by the learning institution. The latter obviously also apply to practice settings that require learning institutions to train students in line with practice.

Theme 3: Upon reflection, the newly qualified BSW graduates pointed to the fact that their training did not prepare them adequately for workplace opportunities

In view of the fact that social work has been declared a scarce skill, funding has been made available by the National Treasury of South Africa for the recruitment of more students to study social work (Draft Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Social Workers, 2006). Since 2006 the Department of Social Development has therefore embarked on a definitive social work scholarship programme to recruit potential students to train as social workers. The table below depicts the total number of scholarship holders per province as at 30 March 2010 (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2010).

The memorandum of agreement with the Department of Social Development singed by recipients of scholarships dictates that they are expected to work the same number of years that they have received the scholarship, plus one additional year (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2010). This means that most of the recipients who graduated recently are currently working for the Department of Social Development as beginner social workers and are therefore working in the field of child protection. The rest are working in the NGO sector, or other governmental organisations, often also in the field of child protection.

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TABLE 5
NUMBER OF RECIPIENTS OF DSD SCHOLARSHIPS

PROVINCE	SCHOLARSHIP HOLDERS
Eastern Cape	1183
Free State	264
Gauteng	537
KwaZulu-Natal	1491
Limpopo	753
North West	525
Mpumalanga	394
Northern Cape	168
Western Cape	268
TOTAL	**5574**

As indicated earlier, the participants who took part in this study concluded that statutory work made up the biggest proportion of their caseloads in their practice settings. In view of the fact that most of them are recipients of the DSD scholarships and therefore destined to work in the field of child protection, some of them remarked that they had not been adequately prepared for work with child protection during their training. They reflected their views around practical placements during the course of their studies as follows:

> *"I was in a health setting in my fourth year, when I graduated I started working at Social Development. Can you see the vast difference?"*

> *"In 1st, 2nd and 3rd year I was placed at schools and did group work, only in a school environment. In my 4th year I was placed at Groote Schuur Hospital where I counselled cancer patients and that. When I started to work at the Department [DSD] the environment, terminology and procedures was totally different again."*

Some of the participants were more specific and stated that their fourth-year practical placements and theory modules did not prepare them adequately for the field of child protection. The following quotations are provided as examples:

> *"Our third year [of training] prepared us better for practice. They focused more on therapeutic intervention."*

> *"Our fourth year [of training] focused mainly on health settings."*

The participants also pointed to the fact that their knowledge of intervention on the macro level did not prepare them adequately for practice settings. They commented as follows:

> *"Our macro modules should focus more on programmes."*

> *"Our macro modules did not prepare us for modernisation; it was not even included in our training. When we started to work at the Department, they were shocked."*

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Theme 4: Upon reflection, the newly qualified BSW graduates pointed to the fact that the requirements of training institutions and practice settings were not synchronised with each other

The participants pointed out that there were significant differences, especially around statutory social work services and the terminology used, between training institutions and practice settings. They referred to this along the following lines:

> *"The terminology that lecturers used for statutory work is not the same as those that we use in practice. It is very confusing."*
>
> *"Ninety per cent of our work at DSD involves children and families, how to remove a child. We did not even know the terminology when we started to work."*
>
> *"I started with a backlog of statutory work cases and the agency expected me to know the terminology and the documentation. Not being prepared made adjustment even more stressful."*

Upon reflection, the participants noted that educators at training institutions and managers of welfare organisations should be in agreement about their training and the expectations of practice settings, as this would "*save us a lot of stress and anxiety".*

Another concern the participants expressed was that educators at training institutions were not informed about the realities of practice settings. The common view was encapsulated in the following comment made by one of the participants: *"Lecturers seems to be distanced from what happens in practice."*

They recommended that educators should visit the different welfare organisations in order to familiarise themselves with the current context of welfare organisations – *"to find out about the current context in which social workers are working and adjust to the current training."*

Most writers agree that social work is a highly stressful occupation, with stress deriving in particular from role conflict between client advocacies and the need to meet agency needs (Lukelo, 2004; Naidoo & Kasiram, 2003; Soji, 2005). These authors also stipulate that when newly qualified social workers realise that the costs of working as a social worker outweigh the extent to which their expectations are met, the results are often disillusionment with their role and the profession. Stress in the workplace is most evident where newly qualified social workers are concerned. As graduates take on their new occupation, a transition occurs. This transition involves the abandonment of their self-perceived role as "student" and the adoption of the self-perceived and expected role as "professional social worker" (Mashigo, 2008:21). This change in roles, as mentioned above, is in itself a stressful experience, and the way that the newly qualified social workers will adapt to their new role will depend on their capacities to appraise and cope with stress. The way these workers experience this transition and the amount of stress involved are dependent on several factors.

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CONCLUSIONS

The social workers who took part in this study reflected that they had not been adequately trained to apply the different pieces of legislation and policies in social work practice and practice settings. It became obvious that the biggest portion of their workload consisted of statutory work in the field of child protection, and they experienced significant challenges in this regard. They also remarked that they were not well informed about court proceedings, the respective forms that they had to use in court, knowledge about the best interests of the child during statutory intervention, and writing court reports. The fact that they received little or no supervision in practice settings obviously contributed to their anxiety and their feeling overwhelmed.

The graduates emphasised the reality that they were struggling to implement their theory, knowledge and skills in practice. Although it is not uncommon for newly qualified graduates to struggle with the implementation of theory in practice, it appears that their high caseloads, lack of supervision and the fact that experienced social workers were not always good role models compounded the problem. In addition, the different theories presented to them during their training caused confusion when they wanted to implement these in practice.

Most beginner social workers (as recipients of DSD scholarships) are compelled to start their careers in the field of child protection, and the rest of them with NGOs. Upon reflection, they all stated that they were not adequately prepared for the current workplace settings in South Africa. They stressed that neither their theoretical nor their practical modules prepared them adequately for this field.

Lastly, the newly qualified BSW graduates noted that the terminology used by training institutions and practice settings is not synchronised. As recommendations, they suggested that lecturing staff from training institutions should familiarise themselves with the current context of practice settings and practice realities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the goal and findings of the study as stated above, the researcher offers several recommendations.

- Schools/Departments of Social Work should give more prominence to the exit-level outcomes of the BSW, specifically in relation to legislation and policies, especially in view of preparing student social workers on the “what” and “how” of statutory social work service delivery.
- Social work practical work placements for students should be chosen so as to provide students with orientation and exposure to statutory social work.
- Social work training institutions should engage in more consultative discussion with those in practice in order to become more informed about the practice realities and challenges.
- Social work training institutions should make a concerted effort to pitch their curricular content at a level that is practice-informed and reality-based, and to dove-

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tail their offerings to bridge the divide between training institutions and practice, so as to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

- All beginner social work students should receive supervision in order to ease them into the realities of practice and mitigate the challenges that they are confronted with when starting out as newly qualified social workers.

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Dr Mariana de Jager, Department of Social Work, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, South Africa.